

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**An inquiry into students' and teachers' perceptions and
use of small group work (SGW) teaching and learning
experiences within an international school environment**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in
Second Language Teaching**

at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

**Rebecca Cameron
2016**

Abstract

Research into 21st century education has consistently indicated that a key element of preparation for the contemporary workplace is the fostering of skills in collaboration, including the ability to negotiate with others. Furthermore, the advantages for language learners (LLs) in the midst of collaborative small group work (SGW) teams has been demonstrated time and time again in the literature.

The approach undertaken drew on Exploratory Practice (EP), evolving into an inquiry into the perceptions of Diploma Programme (DP) school students and their teachers. Ultimately it provides insights into their views on the implementation of a SGW approach as a means of gaining access to grade level curriculum within a multilingual, International Baccalaureate (IB)-accredited school environment, in Germany, where the core curriculum is delivered in English.

Data was gathered from the students and teachers in this particular context using multiple data-collection tools, including both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews over a period of ten weeks. The findings suggest that, overall, both teachers and students have a favourable view of a SGW approach. However, a number of implications have also been drawn regarding the polarity of perceptions uncovered in some instances, specifically with regards to the teaching and learning of subject specific language, and the degree of scaffolding that effective use of SGW requires.

The study culminates with several recommendations such as the fostering and maintenance of an institutional climate that celebrates diversity; the on-going professional development for teachers in SGW management techniques and practices; the need for institutional investment in terms of sufficient time and space to implement SGW training, as well as time and purpose-built spaces to deliver SGW more effectively; and finally more active collaboration between teachers and their students, for guiding and informing pedagogical practice, and specifically aimed at enhancing the outcomes for ELLs within similar international school settings.

Acknowledgements

Collaboration, as I have experienced in the course of this research, is at the heart of everything. I could not have completed this study without the collaborative efforts of my supervisors, volunteer participants, family, friends, peers and partner. All were equally valued. Furthermore, given the recommendations arising from this study, the irony of the amount of scaffolding I required to get through this project does not escape me. Thank you for all the various forms of intellectual and emotional scaffolding that was provided, namely from: Dr Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire for being a source of consistent support and practical advice from the outset; Dr Gillian Skyrme for pushing me to see insights I didn't know existed; the participants for generously providing their time, which yielded the rich data for me to write about; my family, friends and peers who graciously provided a listening ear, a sounding board and continued to encourage me to see it through to the end, and my partner, who ensured I remained fed, watered and nurtured throughout the final months.

Table of contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of contents	iii
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Rationale for the research project	1
1.2 Purpose of the research project	2
1.3 Context of the study	3
1.4 Research questions	4
1.5 Structure of the thesis.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	6
2.1 Introduction	6
2.2 Defining SGW	7
2.3 Changing educational climate into the 21st century	9
2.4 Theoretical perspectives of SGW.....	16
2.5 SGW and language learners (LLs)	17
2.6 SGW and affective dimensions – students' perceptions.....	19
2.6.1 Factors leading to engagement	19
2.6.2 Factors leading to disengagement	21
2.7 SGW and cultural dimensions	23
2.8 SGW and learner's age.....	23
2.9 SGW and issues to do with teacher implementation	24
2.10 Summary.....	33

Chapter 3 Methodology	34
3.1 Introduction	34
3.2 Research approach	35
3.3 The participants	39
3.3.1 The teachers	39
3.3.2 The students	40
3.4 The instruments – an overview of the development process	41
3.4.1 Baseline instruments	42
3.4.2 The teacher reflection surveys	43
3.4.3 The student exit slips	44
3.4.4 The interview questions	45
3.5 Implementation	47
3.6 Ethical considerations	51
3.7 Validity and reliability	52
3.8 Data Handling	52
3.9 Data analysis	53
3.9.1 Quantitative findings	53
3.9.2 Qualitative data analysis	55
3.10 Reflecting on the journey	58
Chapter 4 Findings	60
4.1 Introduction	60
4.2 Quantitative findings	61
4.2.1 Students' perceptions	61
4.2.2 Teachers' perceptions	71
4.3 Qualitative findings	79
4.3.1 Students' perspectives	79
4.3.1.1 Engagement factors	79
4.3.1.2 Disengagement factors	85
4.3.2 Teachers' perspectives	95

4.3.2.1 Engagement factors.....	96
4.3.2.2 Disengagement factors.....	100
4.4 <i>Conclusions</i>	104
4.4.1 Students' perspectives	104
4.4.2 Teachers' perspectives	106
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	108
5.1 <i>Introduction</i>	108
5.2 <i>Contextual factors</i>	108
5.3 <i>Perceptions and challenges</i>	114
5.3.1 SGW and social dynamics	114
5.3.2 SGW and academic outcomes.....	116
5.3.3 SGW and task fit.....	118
5.3.4 SGW and logistical factors.....	118
5.4 <i>The role of the teacher</i>	119
5.5 <i>Summary</i>	121
Chapter 6 Conclusions.....	123
6.1 <i>Introduction</i>	123
6.2 <i>Context</i>	123
6.3 <i>Pedagogy and methodology</i>	125
6.4 <i>Limitations of the study</i>	127
6.5 <i>Concluding thoughts</i>	129
References	130
Appendices	138
Appendix 1 Allwright's three processes of teacher development.....	138
Appendix 2 Direct and indirect links between data collection instruments and research questions	139
Appendix 3 Students' baseline survey version no. 4	140
Appendix 4 Teachers' baseline survey version no. 4	151

Appendix 5 Student Exit Slip for SGW	158
Appendix 6 Small Group Work Activity and Reflection Survey.....	159
Appendix 7 Post implementation teachers' focus group questions version no. 2.....	163
Appendix 8 Post implementation students' focus group questions version no. 4.....	165
Appendix 9 Classroom observation tally sheet	169
Appendix 10 Log of Teacher participants for research (as at 9th Dec 2014)	170
Appendix 11 Introductory statement/email for participant teachers to share with Diploma-level students re small group work (SGW) research	172

Table of figures

Figure 1 'Student orientation, teaching method and level of engagement' taken from Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 6).....	11
Figure 2 Team learning beliefs and behaviours - model, taken from Van den Bossche et al., (2006, p. 503).....	15
Figure 3 The 4Cs Framework, taken from Coyle (2007, p. 555).....	18
Figure 4 The implementation timeline.....	41
Figure 5 Sample of exit slip feedback.....	50
Figure 6 Sample findings breakdown from students' baseline survey.....	54
Figure 7 Question 1 Students' baseline survey.....	62
Figure 8 Question 2 Students' baseline survey.....	63
Figure 9 Question 3 Students' baseline survey.....	64
Figure 10 Question 4 Students' baseline survey.....	65
Figure 11 Question 5 Students' baseline survey.....	66
Figure 12 Question 6 Students' baseline survey.....	67
Figure 13 Question 7 Students' baseline survey.....	68
Figure 14 Question 8 Students' baseline survey.....	69
Figure 15 Question 11 Students' baseline survey.....	70
Figure 16 Question 1 Teachers' baseline survey.....	72
Figure 17 Question 2 Teachers' baseline survey.....	73
Figure 18 Question 3 Teachers' baseline survey.....	74
Figure 19 Question 4 Teachers' baseline survey.....	75
Figure 20 Question 5 Teachers' baseline survey.....	76
Figure 21 Question 6 Teachers' baseline survey.....	78